

Adlai Stevenson

UN Ambassador and statesman (1900 – 1965)



Stevenson came about his interest in politics naturally. His paternal grandfather, Adlai Stevenson, was Vice President under GROVER CLEVELAND, and it was his great grandfather, Jesse W. Fell, a prominent Quaker from Pennsylvania, who first suggested Lincoln for the Presidency. As Stevenson once said, “I have a bad case of hereditary politics.” Religion was also a major force in his life: “My mother was a Republican and a Unitarian,” Adlai explained. “My father was a Democrat and a Presbyterian. I wound up in his party and her church, which seemed an expedient solution to the problem.”

A Princeton graduate, he attended Harvard and Northwestern University law schools and, in 1927, joined a law firm in Chicago. Stevenson spent 1933-34 in Washington, where he was counsel to the Agricultural Adjustment Administration of FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT. He returned to Washington, from 1941-44, to serve as special assistant and personal counsel to Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox.

In 1945, as special assistant to Secretary of State EDWARD STETTINIUS, Stevenson helped formulate the preparatory documents for the United Nations Organization, and later he became Chief of the United States delegation to the UN Preparatory Commission. President Truman appointed him a delegate to the UN General Assembly in 1946 and 1947.

In 1948, he was elected Governor of Illinois by the largest plurality in the state’s history. In his one term he was credited by both business and labor with cleaning up much of the corruption that had dominated Illinois politics. His simple but eloquent prose, coupled with wit, defused many a heated controversy. He vetoed a bill that would have restricted the freedom of Illinois cats, declaring, “To escort a cat abroad on a leash is against the nature of the owner...”

He was drafted by the Democratic National Committee to run for President, losing to the popular DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER in 1952. Again the nominee for President in 1956, he received the largest popular vote of any losing candidate in American history. It was the seventh and last time this century that two Centurions opposed each other for the Presidency [editor’s note: ALTON B. PARKER, in 1904, and CHARLES EVANS HUGHES, in 1916, joined the club post-election. In 1912, three candidates were Centurions.]

In 1961, he was appointed Ambassador to the United Nations. He died on July 14, 1965, on the steps of the United States Embassy in London, in the company of MARIETTA TREE.